



MONASTERY OF SAINT JOHN OF SAN FRANCISCO

E-NEWSLETTER ❖ WINTER 2015

ON OUR LORD'S NATIVITY

HIEROMONK ALEXIS

No event in world history had such consequences as did the Birth of Christ. God Himself “bent down the heavens and came down,” in the words of the psalm. This was a miracle of miracles, a mystery of mysteries. All we can do at this point is to stand with trepidation before the icon of the Nativity in reverence and praise for Christ’s boundless love for us.

When we read in the Gospel of John that “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” all of us realize that this is about Christ Jesus. But why is the newly-born Christ referred to as the Word here and elsewhere in the Gospels? Up to that time to the Hebrews the concept “word” denoted God’s creative power, while for the Greeks it referred to the source of the magnificent arrangement of the world. But the time came for God to reveal His will, His paths, to humanity. For this the Only-Begotten Son of God came to dwell in the world, thus overcoming the barrier between God and man. The Word became God’s living presence for humanity, conveying life and salvation to it.

This Word which became flesh is actually the very same God before whom the Seraphim veiled their faces in Isaiah’s vision, exclaiming in fear and trembling, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabaoth”—so

unbearable was God’s greatness. No one could see God and remain alive. And so this incomprehensible and unapproachable God becomes flesh. He draws near to us, enters our lives, and starts knocking at our souls. As the Book of Revelation describes it, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me” (3:20). Our great Lord, Whom the whole universe cannot contain, wishes to dwell in our wretched souls.

We all know how God came through His servant Moses to save His people from Egyptian slavery. But now he comes personally in order to free us from our slavery to sin and death and to lead us to where freedom, peace, and love reign. Again quoting from Revelation, “Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be His people and God Himself shall be with them: He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more” (21:4).

As we contemplate the state of the world today, it’s very easy to say in despair, “Look what the world is coming to.” But we have a special hope which is based on the fact that God has sent the Savior into the world. Nothing in history can be compared to this event. And yet we will never understand its meaning if we don’t receive Him completely. ❖

IF A TREE FALLS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WOODS...

On the morning of December 11, we were singing Matins in the chapel amidst a ferocious windstorm. We get windstorms around here seasonally, but this was the strongest one I remember. Just as we began a litany, we at the chanter's stand heard a crackling sound, and then a millisecond later,



POW!!!, like a gunshot, as the sizable pine tree next to the church fell onto the roof directly above the choir, punching several holes almost all the way into the church and sending plaster raining down while the wind continued to howl. That it didn't just continue and collapse that side of the church is hard to believe, since these trees weigh tons, literally.

After recovering our senses and finishing the church service, we called up a local tree service straightway; they hustled out to the monastery and, after some investigation, proceeded to crawl up and down on the fallen tree like monkeys, lopping off limbs with their chainsaws and slowly removing the tree from the church roof, chunk by chunk, plugging holes in the roof as they went. They also hauled a stump grinder over and set to work milling down the last bit of tree to the ground, leaving behind a wonderful pile of fragrant mulch for us to use in landscaping.

We also had the tree service guys take down a couple other trees that posed a potential threat to the

buildings, a cedar at the edge of the yard and also a large but dying oak tree behind the Mt. Athos building. We had been thinking that one should come down, and as we watched them work on it we could see our hunch had been right; it was hollow in many places.

We think the tree fell partly because of the rains that had been soaking the ground this fall, and also because the forest fire two years ago burned away the other trees that usually blocked much of the wind, so some of our trees were getting a bit more of a push than they were used to. At all events, we thank God for His protection, for good laborers to help us in our need, and for insurance that helps pay for repairs. And certainly for an abundance of firewood!✠

CHRISTMAS AND THE SECOND COMING

HIEROMONK INNOCENT

At the feast of the Nativity of Christ we celebrate the appearing of Christ. In the “fullness of time” as we hear in the epistle lesson for the day, God’s ultimate plan was fulfilled. God enters this created world. He does this not in a clap of thunder, not through some cosmic rift in the space-time continuum, but through the body of a young Jewish girl (and only after obtaining her permission to do so). Thus, in a little town in Galilee, during the time of the Roman occupation, God enacts His plan. From a human perspective, it is a strange plan. God enters the world, and our first sight of Him with our bodily eyes is that of a helpless newborn infant. The first sound we hear of our incarnate God is the cooing of a babe. We are used to hearing the Christmas story every year, but an over-familiarity blinds us to the actual strangeness of the event. This first appearance of God among us is so paradoxical, so totally “different” that we have to re-examine it to really appreciate it anew.

In the Old Testament we read of the many prophecies predicting the coming of the Messiah. The Jewish

people would hear these prophecies read in the synagogues throughout the year. In the gospel lesson for the Nativity we read that it was the wise men from the East who actually managed to find the Christ child. They were the ones who welcomed Him and knelt in adoration before Him as a little baby. To the Jews, the empire of the East was the enemy that had taken them captive when Jerusalem fell in 587 BC. From a historical perspective, the Jews had only recently been delivered from captivity there. How paradoxical it is that their former captors were now seeking the new king in Israel.



The Gospel lesson goes on to describe how Herod was troubled and “all Jerusalem with him.” Why were they troubled? Why did Herod immediately suspect that this king could be the Christ as evidenced by asking his chief priests and scribes where the Christ was to be born? Perhaps the people knew something big was about to happen. Perhaps there was a sense that the prophecies were about to be fulfilled. The people of Jerusalem were troubled because they did not want this. They were not ready for the Messiah. They already had their way of life and did not want it disrupted—even by something so wonderful as the birth of God in their midst! Yet it actually happened. In the little town of Bethlehem in first century Judea, the Sun of Righteousness had dawned. Yet it was the enemy barbarian Persians who would witness it.

In the forty days before the Nativity of Christ, we journey through the time of prayer and fasting so that we can be truly prepared to gaze in wonder at this Appearing in the cave in Bethlehem. Yet this is not the only appearance that we celebrate. We also anticipate his Second Coming at the end of the ages when all the Messianic prophecies will be brought to ultimate fulfillment. From the 9th Ode of the Compline canon for the 21st of December we hear:

Christ our Judge commands us to be vigilant.
We await expectantly for His visitation,
For He cometh to be born of a virgin.

At Thine awesome second coming, O Christ,
Number me with the sheep at Thy right hand,
For Thou tookest up Thine abode in the flesh to save us.

At Thy first coming to us, O Christ,
Thou desiredst to save the race of Adam;
When Thou shalt come again to judge us,
Show mercy on those who honor Thy Holy Nativity.

The believers of the early Church lived in the expectation of Christ’s imminent return. A watch word of Christians at that time was Maranatha, which is understood to mean, “O Lord, come!” The star that led the Magi to worship Christ was no ordinary star. It was a silent guide that radiated above them, moving along and guiding them to Bethlehem. Herod did not follow this extraordinary star. The Magi had the faith to see that a heavenly body was revealing the birth of an extraordinary earthly King. They could perceive what was actually happening. Like the Magi, let us also rejoice to see the star and be expectant of Our Savior’s return. In the fullness of time He will return—this time not in obscurity but in power and glory. Let us be numbered with those who long for His appearing.

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let him who hears say, “Come.” And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price. He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Apocalypse 22:17, 20)✠

UPCOMING RETREATS

The monastery will be hosting guided retreats in February and March. These are three-day retreats which begin with Vespers at 5:00 PM on Friday and conclude with the Divine Liturgy on Sunday and a final session at 11:30 AM. Housing and all meals will be provided by the monastery. On February 7th, 8th, and 9th, Archpriest James Jorgenson will lead a retreat on the meaning of the liturgical services of Lent. If you ever wondered about the meaning of the services for this season of repentance, this retreat is for you. Don't live your life "going through the motions" of the Fast. Find out more about what it all means and what the Church has given us: tools for real change and repentance.

On March 27th, 28th, and 29th, Abbot Damascene from Saint Herman Orthodox Monastery in Platina will host a Lenten retreat entitled, "Watchfulness and Prayer". In his retreat, Father Damascene will give us a panoramic overview of Orthodox Christian teaching on salvation and deification in the Church: what Christ has done to unite us with God, and what we are to do to become one with Him. He will also draw from the Holy Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church to give practical counsel about establishing a spirit of watchfulness and prayer in the heart as a means to union with Christ.

This Lent, make it a point to do something extra for the care of your soul. There are still spaces left for both retreats. Make the sacrifice and visit our monastery for a retreat. Please review our website for more details. For those who can't afford the cost, scholarships are available. Please contact us by phone or email to make your reservation.

GAGAUZ BIBLE TRANSLATION WORK

Our Fr. Cosmas is continuing his work as a member of the project team coordinated by the Institute for Bible Translation based in Moscow on efforts to produce scriptures in the Gagauz language for Orthodox Christians who speak that language. These people live primarily in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, located in southern Moldova, although Gagauz also live in some villages in the Ukraine. There is also a "Gagauz diaspora" scattered throughout the world in such places as Moscow, Kazakhstan, Istanbul, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Closer to us, there are Gagauz who live in Canada and the United States—particularly around Sacramento, California. Fr. Cosmas has begun to meet some of those who live within driving distance from the monastery—which means that conversation practice in the language does not require a trip all the way to the Autonomous Territorial Unit!

As the project has proceeded, its scope has expanded. In the first stage of discussion, the Institute talked about beginning with a Gospel book for liturgical use, with possibly a Psalter to follow. From time to time, however, one member of the project team or another would suggest, "Why not a full Bible?"

The Institute has not made a complete commitment to a full Bible in the Gagauz language, but the project director for the Gagauz project and also the director of the Institute asked Fr. Cosmas to learn biblical Hebrew so as to be ready to take part in that larger undertaking if it looked as though the budget would permit it. They bought him two grammar books and a dictionary, and from time to time they send a nice message asking, "So how is your study of biblical Hebrew coming along?"